

Your Friends, They Are Jewels

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Ryuko curled up next to Satsuki, her insecurity about sleeping so near to the one that was her enemy longer than her sister having dissipated quickly after Satsuki slipped into her coma-like state. She feared-though she wouldn't admit it to herself-that she would be shy again once she awoke. If anything, her awareness only seemed to make her less nervous. After all, she swatted or pushed away any touch that offended her, much to Ryuko's relief, so save for a few instances, Satsuki allowed her to be close even tonight.

"Ah, ribs..." Satsuki muttered, half-asleep and her brows furrowed in pain.

"Shit, sorry." She moved her arm down a little so that it laid across her middle. Satsuki's breathing immediately eased and her brow lost the crease between them. "Dunno why I keep forgetting."

"... preoccupied, maybe?" she answered, her eyes distant. "You *are* in mourning."

Ryuko grimaced. "Sure, sure, but I should still remember. Broken ribs are serious shit, y'know, and I'm kinda the one that put them there."

"You move... that's all that matters to me."

"Nn, I guess."

She rolls onto her back to stare up at the ceiling that she had grown so familiar with, listening to the sounds of their sleeping family around them. All of them crammed themselves into the Mankanshoku family home; the two sisters, the Mankanshokus themselves, Satsuki's Elites, Iori, and Soroi hunkered down in that small house in the ruins of Honnou for the night, at peace. Or as at peace as such a collection of people could be. Despite her repeated

protests that she was done with sleeping, Satsuki again threatened to leave Ryuko behind. But...

"Ryuko..." Her eyes were closed now, highlighting the gaunt lines of her features even more with the thin moonlight streaming in through the window. She might've been asleep already, dreaming shallowly, but the thought that she occupied her private dreams made her stomach flip.

"Yeah, neesan?" she said, speaking just above a whisper just in case.

"Is it appropriate for me to say... hm..." She stopped as Jakuzure tightened her hold on her hand on her other side, sandwiched comfortably between Satsuki and the wall. Satsuki's small smile was infectious. "To say that that I'm... fond of you?"

Her stomach flipped again, almost violently enough that she could almost taste her dinner. But after a moment of gaping at her, she collected herself enough that there was some measurable amount of calm in her voice.

"Why would that be inappropriate or whatever?" she asked. She turned on her side and propped herself up on her elbow to look down at her properly, trapped on her back as Satsuki was. "I mean, we are sisters. And, like, you've known you've had one for ages."

"I... given the nature of our relationship until I apologized...'

Whether it was exhaustion or something else entirely that made her sound so hesitant to speak, Ryuko didn't bring it up. Satsuki had pride a mile wide. It wasn't misplaced pride for the most part, no, and for the time being she could let it lie undisturbed. There would be all the time in the world to cut at it as part of her sisterly duty. Instead she moved closer to her under the blanket, her hand settling on her sister's upper arm.

"I dunno, Sats, I've gotten pretty fond of you too. Don't tell anyone though."

"Or what?" Her eye cracked open, the weak light reflected brightly in that sliver.

"I dunno, but somehow I think I can make you regret it. I have a reputation to protect after all."

"Ah yes, Matoi Ryuko, who is secretly soft and pleasant underneath all her barbs," Satsuki says, a low chuckle shuddering out from her chest. "Like a rose."

"Fuck, I'm a flower now? Thanks. You're the one that's soft, shit."

"Perhaps I am, and perhaps you'll get to see more of it if you're lucky."

Ryuko couldn't help but smile then. Admittedly, she never entertained the idea of Satsuki being anything other than the iron-cast dictator until after she came crashing down to earth. Satsuki's expression as she held Ryuko then-even as the shock over the loss of Senketsu settled into raw disbelief and numbness-made her feel something akin to a light flooding in to fill the gaps. It felt cliched to think of it like that now, but there was reassurance that somebody related to her cared enough to catch her right out of the air, risking death and pain and the chance that she could miss the catch altogether. All of these people had. She not only had the incomprehensible love of Mako and her family, but the indomitable 'fondness' of her own sister and the people her sister called her own. It still felt incomplete without Senketsu, but these people had their own places in her.

"Hey." Satsuki tapped her hand, the motion perhaps the gentlest that she had ever initiated with her. "I'm sorry about Senketsu."

Ryuko blinked, growing red when she felt the tears carving hot trails down her cheeks. She scrubbed them away with the sleeve of her

pajamas and Satsuki's hand fell away from hers. To think she was so transparent... "It's nothing, alright?"

"Alright, Ryuko."

It was a long time before Ryuko could look at her again, but when she did, Satsuki's breathing was shallow and her eyes closed. Nonetheless, she sensed that Ryuko seemed ready to talk some more.

"You know," she said slowly. "I meant it when I said that you don't have to force yourself to act like my sister. You have a good family already and I wouldn't want to intrude where I'm not supposed to be. As the saying goes, 'Blood of the covenant is stronger than the water of the womb'."

"That's the whole quote?"

"Yes, and it's absolutely true."

"Well, I'm not gonna sit here and deny that they're my family. They're my people and all that. Like, I'm sure you feel the same about these assholes." She nudged Sanageyama's face with her blanketed foot, making him slump into Gamagoori's shoulder with a loud snore. "And you obviously think of me as your sister."

Satsuki nodded. Perhaps it's the light or relative lack thereof, but Ryuko swore that she blushed a little.

"Is there a saying for people who still wanna be close to their relative even if they have a covenant family or whatever?" she continued.

Her eyebrows shot up at that, her eyes wide with surprise despite the exhaustion lining her features. Another rush of something flooded her chest to see this.

"Truly? After all I've done?"

"Yeah, idiot. I wouldn't call you 'neesan' if I didn't wanna, like, acknowledge what we are. You did a lot of fucked up stuff that I'm not gonna mince around, but from what I know about the situation, I don't think you had much of a choice but to play that bitch's game, right?"

"I... I can't objectively say that it was the best choice-"

"My point is that even though, yeah, you were a giant shitty dictator, I still wanna be your sister."

Something bright slipped into the valley of shadow between them before Ryuko noticed that the rims of her sister's eyes glistened with more tears threatening to fall, though the smile gracing her lips quelled any worry before it had a chance to rise. She hadn't ever seen her smile so widely, her face unburdened by the weight of the world. Perhaps that's why she chose that moment to lean forward and place a fleeting kiss to her forehead, to prolong it or make it bigger.

Satsuki went still under her and the corners of her mouth drooped as she pulled away. Except that before another wave of worry could surface, the smile came back just as strong as before and the blush she blamed on the dark before became undeniable even as a cloud meandered in front of the moon. She reached up and touched the spot that she kissed, her eyes fluttering closed.

Ryuko flopped onto her stomach to have a reasonable excuse to hide her face before Satsuki could notice the undoubtedly doofy look planted there. Her arm inched back around her waist, this time not too high nor too low, and her fingers curl lightly against her too narrow body, asking a question still too new to verbalize. Satsuki answered and laced her fingers with her, as always with surprising warmth. This time, she also moved closer. Not much since she was still in pain, but enough for Ryuko, who suddenly felt safely and lovingly trapped between her and Mako.

"You big softy," she mutters, peaking out between her hair and her pillows.

"I'm still gonna..." Sleep pursued her sister quickly enough to slur her words now.

"Still gonna what? Cover me with bunnies and kittens?"

"Kick your ass... but then I'll bring puppies..."

Ryuko snorted into her pillow. "Okay, neesan, when you're better, I'll let ya."

"Nn."

Satsuki's breathing slowed down considerably in the next few minutes and Mako scooted closer so that she could feel her drooling into her back. Between the two of them and the light snoring beyond them, Ryuko felt a measure of peace for the first time since Senketsu had gone. At least now the growing he talked about seemed less of a hard road to take, not when she had this family around her.